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Submitted by:

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Other titles held during associations with President Kennedy:

American Ambassador to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Time and Place of Interview:

2:30 p. m.

Wednesday, March 25, 1964

Ambassador Thompson's office

Interviewer: Miss Elizabeth Donahue

Miss Donahue:

Mr. Thompson, I wonder if you could tell us when you first met President Kennedy.

Ambassador Thompson:

I do not recall exactly when I first met the late President, but I do recall meeting him at a party in about 1949. I also recall having a long discussion with him in Rome in 1950 or 1951. On the latter occasion, he questioned me at length about the Soviet Union.

I also recall an incident when I came before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for confirmation of my appointment as Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Several of the Republican members made some rather flattering remarks, whereupon the then Senator Kennedy spoke up and said that the Republican

meet the President, but I told them that with so many distinguished people present, I did not want to bother the President. However, he went out of his way to come over to speak to them.

On another occasion, I was sitting in a meeting of the Executive Committee during the Cuban crisis and mentioned to the Attorney General, who was sitting next to me, that I was going to have to leave before the meeting was over in order to catch a plane to Colorado to attend my mother's funeral. Although I did not connect the matter at the time, I did see the Attorney General later whisper something to the President, and shortly after that one of the President's aides told me that the President had arranged for me to go to Colorado on a military plane, which would take off at any time I would designate.

Another example of the President's sensitivity occurred when I was called back from a brief holiday in Cape Cod for the third time in less than three weeks, at his request. Although pleased at the thought that my advice was wanted, I was rather annoyed at this third interruption of my holiday, particularly when the subject was the Vietnamese crisis, about which I felt I had relatively little to offer. I, of course, did not say anything to anyone about my feelings, but at the beginning of the

meeting on this subject, the President opened the discussion by saying, "Tommy, we are sorry to have called you back again, but we didn't want to do a lot of work on this subject and then later find out from you that what we had done was all wrong." Even though I knew he was teasing, any resentment I had completely vanished.

The President had several extraordinary capabilities for his position. One that impressed me forcefully was his exceptional capacity for grasping an intricate subject quickly, either from a written document or an oral briefing. On one occasion, he had to leave a meeting of the Executive Committee for some pressing business, during which time we considered a document about three or four pages long. We discussed the matter for, I should think, about an hour, and finally after much argument and thought, arrived at a consensus. About this time, the President returned to the room, and after glancing through the document in a time so short that I could not have read half of it, he said, "Well, gentlemen, I think the following . . ." and proceeded to give exactly the conclusion that the rest of us had reached after long discussion. I do not believe he could have seen the document before the meeting.

Another extraordinary capability was his phenomenal memory. On one occasion he said to me, "Well, Tommy, I suppose we'll end up with the Berlin solution which you proposed." I had made so many suggestions about the Berlin problem that I could not recall which one he was referring to but he had them all clearly in his mind.

The President's mind acted so quickly that he tended to be impatient with anyone who was long-winded or unclear in his statements. In most cases this impatience was not evident to anyone who did not know him well but in the case of garrulous junior officers, I observed that they were seldom included on any subsequent briefings.

On two occasions, the President asked me to be present when he was briefing the leadership of Congress on critical problems. One was in connection with the Cuban crisis. In the course of the discussion he was under considerable pressure and criticism, particularly from Republicans in the leadership, and he called on me for expert testimony, which I gave. Another occasion was when he informed the leadership about the sale of wheat to the Soviet Union. He managed skillfully to let anyone speak who wanted to without getting himself bound in

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some notes or dictating other passages, including some remarks related to the local scene and after about twenty minutes of this, asked his secretary to try to put the whole thing together. So far as I know, he had no opportunity to do more than skim through it before we arrived. When he got up to speak, he seemed scarcely ever to read the text and merely glanced from time-to-time at it, but gave an address which would have justified his listeners to conclude that it had been worked over and over and polished to perfection.

I sat in on most of the discussions with the President of the Cuban crisis in October 1962. I presume that the discussions in the Executive Committee will have adequately been covered by others, and would add only a few personal impressions. One of my strongest impressions was the remarkable coolness of the President, despite the fact that he was probably more aware than anyone of the gravity of the situation and the weight of the decisions he would be making.

I was involved in the drafting of most of his exchanges with Chairman Khrushchev and in each case was impressed by the rapidity with which he grasped all of the implications involved in a text submitted to him. In every case, the amendments he made were an improvement.

I was asked on a number of occasions for judgments on what likely Soviet reactions would be to a given action on our part and I suppose that much of the confidence which the President later placed in me was due to the fact that my batting average on this occasion was unusually high. I was very much opposed to a sudden air strike at the Soviet missiles on a number of grounds, one of which was that Khrushchev's character was such that he might immediately give an order for a Soviet counteraction which would result eventually, if not immediately, in nuclear war. I considered that if such a course were to be followed, it should be done in such a way that Khrushchev would have time to reflect on his actions and that his advisers would have an opportunity to counsel him. I pointed out that this action would result in the death of considerable numbers of Soviet military personnel and that the prestige of the Red Army would be engaged in such a way that some strong Soviet reaction would be inevitable. I, and others, raised the question as to what we would do if Khrushchev, in reply, ordered an air attack on our missiles in Turkey. One adviser said that in this event we should attack the bases where the Soviet missiles came from and this seemed to point up how close the proposed action would bring us to nuclear war. These missiles in Turkey were very

much on the President's mind and he several times expressed annoyance that the Department had not yet carried out the decision which had been taken long before the Cuban crisis to remove them. He seemed to forget that he had agreed in the plans for their removal which required careful preparation with the Turks and others. When the crisis was at its height and it appeared that we were within twenty-four hours or less of an invasion of Cuba, the President again considered making some statement about the removal of these missiles. He explained that his concern was that an invasion was such a serious step and would result in the loss of many lives and it would be difficult for the public to understand why this had not been avoided by the removal of these missiles from Turkey, which were obsolete and which it was to our interest to remove in any event.

I very much favored the blockade path and was asked what the Soviet reaction would be. I said I thought they would probably try to run one ship through to test our reaction, but if we made clear we were not bluffing, they would back down. This is what, in fact, did happen. The President had an unusual faculty for concealing his own opinions while drawing out the thoughts of others and until the decision was actually made, I

was never sure what the final decision would be. Looking back upon it, however, I think that he had actually made up his mind much earlier but wanted to be certain that all advantages and disadvantages of each course of action were fully explored.

A number of times in the course of the discussion, the President indicated he was aware of what the political risks to him were and explained the grounds on which he would be attacked politically, but so far as I could tell, never let this affect his basic decisions other than to consider how they could best be presented.

Llewellyn F. Thompson  
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